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C O N F I D E N T I A L DJIBOUTI 000730

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF AND AF/E

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN OFFICIALS HOLD TALKS WITH DJIBOUTI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARGUERITA D. RAGSDALE.

REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Minister of Cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Mahmoud Ali Youssef, told Ambassador May 20 during their meeting at the MFA on another matter, that the May 18-19 visit of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to Djibouti had gone very well. Meles had come to Djibouti to inaugurate what Youssef described as the Ethiopian Government's "most expensive embassy complex in Africa." (Note: Ambassador had attended the inauguration which took place in Djibouti on May 18. End note).

12. (C) While Meles also met privately with Guelleh during his visit, the visit was an opportunity as well for Djibouti to launch the first meeting in five years of the Ethiopia-Djibouti Ministerial Committee. The Committee included Ethiopia's Seyoum Mesfin, Foreign Minister, Girma Birru, Minister of Commerce and Industries, Getachew Belai, Minister of Finance, Haile Assegide, Minister of State for Infrastructure, Mulegeta Alemseged, described as "Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister," and their Djiboutian counterparts. Also participating from Ethiopia were the Director General of African Affairs at Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ethiopian Ambassador to Djibouti, Shemsudin Ahmed Robleh. Meetings of the Ministerial Group were in progress on May 20 when Youssef broke away to meet with Ambassador.

13. (C) In a quick brief, Youssef said the Ministerial Group talks were focused on three key areas, the first being Somalia. Djibouti hoped "to bring Ethiopia around" in its thinking on the future of Somalia. The focus is to encourage Ethiopia to undertake higher level engagement in the Somali peace process.

14. (C) The second area of Ministerial discussion, Youssef said, is development of Djibouti's new Port of Doraleh, whose construction is being managed by Emirates National Oil Company. Ethiopia wants not only to invest in the port but in the possible development as well of an oil pipeline that would run directly from the Port of Doraleh to a point in Ethiopia, perhaps Addis Ababa, according to Youssef. (Note: Fahmi al-Hag, Investment Advisor to President Guelleh (protect), told Ambassador several weeks ago that the Independent Petroleum Group (SAK) Kuwait (IPG) is interested in construction of a "white oil" pipeline from Doraleh port to a discharging or distribution terminal in Addis Ababa. A pipeline "order of magnitude cost estimate" completed two years ago for the project makes note of Ethiopia's interest. Petronas of Malaysia is also said to be interested in this project. End note).

15. (C) A third area of interest for the two delegations, Youssef said, is the SEA-ME-WE 4 intercontinental cable network that Djibouti wants to participate in but lacks the necessary capital to join singularly. Ethiopia may be interested in linking up with Djibouti for access and discussions are taking place on best means to initiate that involvement, according to Youssef.

16. (C) Youssef said Djibouti was quite pleased about the prospect of talks with Ethiopia at the ministerial level because too much time had passed since the last session five years ago. He commented, however, that it is never easy to negotiate with Ethiopians, so the talks have not been easy. In the history of dealing with Ethiopia, the farther it is apart from Eritrea, he mused, the closer it wants to move toward Djibouti. Djibouti benefits economically from the existing tensions between the two countries and while unfortunate in a way, he said, it is "a fact of life."

17. (C) Comment: Youssef gave every indication that Djibouti is keen to make the most of the current economic advantages it enjoys with Ethiopia. Direct Ethiopian investment in Djibouti would strengthen ties to an extent that would be more difficult to end should the political climate in the region change -- especially between Ethiopia and Eritrea -- in the not-too-distant future. End Comment.

RAGSDALE